

Chemical plants in state need closer scrutiny

Published in the Asbury Park Press 07/15/05

BY BARBARA BUONO

The horrific acts of terrorism in London are an unwelcome reminder that we continue to live in the shadow of Sept. 11, 2001. While the world has witnessed how extremely difficult it is to thwart the work of suicide bombers, it is our government's duty to ensure that every precautionary measure be invoked to strengthen and protect our country from another attack.

One striking example where creating and implementing structured safeguards would have an enormous impact is at our chemical facilities. In order to block access to any stockpiled materials that could aid in possible terrorist attacks, our leaders must craft and enforce uniform security standards at all chemical plants and facilities.

National security issues such as securing chemical plants should be addressed at the federal level. However, for almost four years, the Bush administration has failed to work with the Congress to pass legislation that would increase chemical plant security. The president's inaction has unnecessarily put all communities in New Jersey and around our nation at increased risk.

New Jersey must act now to address the president's refusal to safeguard access to chemical plants.

Chemical facilities are considered potential terrorist targets due to the vast amounts of lethal agents they store. This is particularly true in New Jersey, the most densely populated state. Also, and most important, these facilities are not mandated to assess their vulnerabilities, nor does any government entity have the power to set basic security guidelines and procedures.

A recent report on chemical facilities prepared by the Congressional Research Service noted that New Jersey has seven facilities that, if attacked or ruptured, could impact more than 1 million residents. This is only one of the many post-9/11 reports that have studied this issue.

Last year, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group released an alarming report on the failure of chemical companies to protect the public. The American Chemistry Council, which represents only 7 percent of the most toxic facilities and is the industry's largest oversight committee, implemented a Responsible Care program in 1988 to improve chemical safety throughout the country. The study found that chemical accidents actually increased following 9/11 at chemistry council facilities. The report concluded that "the voluntary precautions of Responsible Care are not enough to protect Americans from accidental chemical releases or the possibility of terrorist attacks."

While chemical facilities claim they are working to increase security and safety measures, they are not held accountable by an external entity. Uniform standards must be imposed and adhered to by all chemical facilities. Industry-supported groups and self-regulation are not satisfactory when dealing with security and safety concerns of this magnitude.

U.S. Sen. Jon S. Corzine, D-N.J., who sponsored the Chemical Security Act, has been the dominant leader of this effort on Capitol Hill. This act would authorize the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Homeland Security to establish requirements designed to improve security at chemical facilities. I support this legislation.

Given the indefensible recalcitrance of the Bush administration to make the safety of our chemical facilities a national priority, New Jersey must lead the nation by taking a proactive approach to solving this homeland security issue. Sen. Steven M. Sweeney, D-Gloucester, and I have introduced legislation (S-588) to strengthen the security of chemical plants throughout our state, specifically to combat possible terrorist or criminal attacks.

This bill would require chemical facilities covered by the Toxic Catastrophe Prevention Act to conduct a full assessment of their infrastructure. In conjunction with local law enforcement and first-responders, the facility would be required to produce prevention, preparedness and response proposals.

The proposed plans would include suggestions for safer design and maintenance of the chemical facility, and ensure the plant is using safe, up-to-date technology. Also, the plan must outline security measures to eliminate or minimize the possibility of a hazardous substance release. Finally, each facility must submit its plans to the Department of Environmental Protection for review and approval.

S-588 would create a much-needed watchdog over the chemical industry, increase safety throughout our state and keep a constant check on the vulnerabilities of chemical plants. I urge all New Jerseyans to write to their legislators and acting Gov. Codey requesting them to make passage of this legis-lation a priority. Nothing less than the future of our public health, safety and welfare hangs in the balance.

Barbara Buono is a Democratic state senator whose 18th District includes parts of Middlesex County.

Copyright © 2005 Asbury Park Press. All rights reserved.
Use of this site indicates your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#). (Updated 4/13/05)
Site design by [Asbury Park Press](#) / [Contact us](#)